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Parapsychology in Brazil:  
Collaboration and Exchange in the Context of Brazilian Culture

Abstract

In Brazil, there is no community of secular, academic parapsychologists. Instead, what is called parapsychology is largely the product of allegiances to Catholicism or Spiritism. The essay surveys Catholic and Spiritist parapsychology, then it discusses the relations between PA and Brazilian parapsychologists. These relations may be viewed as exchanges in which the legitimacy of first-world science (here represented as parapsychology) is exchanged for access to Brazilian psychics or paid trips to Brazilian conferences. Alternative arrangements are considered.

I have already published extensively on the historical, social, and cultural aspects of parapsychology and Spiritism in Brazil (1987a, 1987b, 1987c, 1990); this essay will review some of my findings and present some suggestions for researchers associated with the Parapsychological Association who wish to do work in Brazil. The paper is divided into three sessions: an overview of Brazilian parapsychology, and the relations between Brazilian parapsychologists and those from other countries.

#### An Overview of Parapsychology in Brazil

Brazil does not have a coherent community of academic parapsychologists, and there are few if any people in Brazil who research and publish at the standards of the Parapsychological Association. Instead, what is called "parapsychology" in Brazil is largely defined by rival groups of Catholic and Spiritist (Kardecist) intellectuals.

Foremost among the Catholics are the conservative Franciscan Boaventura Kloppenburg, currently a bishop in Bahia, and a group of Jesuits who are located primarily in São Paulo and southern Brazil. Kloppenburg has written numerous tracts against Kardecian Spiritism, Umbanda, and various other religious or philosophical movements that practice spirit mediumship. Most of his work was published before Vatican II, but an examination of his work since Vatican II shows that his rhetoric may be somewhat more restrained but his essential position has not changed (Hess, 1990). His book *Spiritism in Brazil* (1960) included a discussion of parapsychology, used mainly to disprove Spiritism. When I spoke with him in 1986, he said he was preparing a new edition of the book, but he was considering dropping out the section on parapsychology, probably because he had grown more critical and skeptical of parapsychology.

There is also a group of Jesuits associated with the publisher Loyola and the former Latin American Center for Parapsychology (CLAP) of the Anchieta College of São Paulo. When I visited this in 1983, everything but the Center was closed down, and its leader, Padre Oscar González Quevedo, was under a prohibition to give interviews or speak in public. The Center had a large library, and it formerly published the *Revista da Parapsicologia*. As far as I was able to ascertain, the Center and College were closed for economic reasons. González Quevedo (or, as he is known in Brazil, Padre Quevedo) was under prohibition because he had published a book that used parapsychology and psychology to criticize the demonic interpretation of possession. This violated Church doctrine, and most copies of the book were collected and burned. When I returned in 1985, González Quevedo was at a Catholic high school in São Paulo, and he was unable to grant me an interview. On my return trip in 1988, I learned that he had since been released from his prohibition to speak.

González Quevedo has written a number of books, some of which are extremely polemical attacks on Spiritism, Umbanda, and the Afro-Brazilian religions (e.g., 1978). Others are more didactic: they are expository accounts of what parapsychology is, of course, with a careful sifting through the sieve of Catholic doctrine (1964, 1968, 1974). Survival research and reincarnation--two areas which would support the Spiritist viewpoint--do not fare very well, and non-spiritic interpretations of mediumistic phenomena are favored. His parapsychology books emphasize studies of mediums and spontaneous case research rather than experimental parapsychology, and he generally rehearses the old literature. Where he does discuss Brazilian mediums (e.g., 1978), it is generally to debunk the claims of Spiritists: a Brazilianized Randi.

Another important Jesuit is Padre Edvino Friderichs, who lives on the campus of a Jesuit high school in Porto Alegre. He has published many expository accounts of parapsychology and psychology directed toward lay readers (e.g., 1979), and he has earned a reputation for as a therapist who sometimes treats poltergeist cases. One of his many books includes some case histories, most of which are culled from newspaper clippings, some of which reflect first-hand interviews, but none of which goes into detailed

psychological analysis of family dynamics (1980). Friderichs is considerably more ecumenical than Quevedo and Kloppenburg, and he is more concerned with using parapsychology to teach Brazilian laypeople the error of their "superstitions" than to attack Umbandists and Spiritists.

A review of the back issues of the Catholic *Revista da Parapsicologia* revealed little careful empirical research. I found only one publication of an experiment, and this appeared to suffer from serious design flaws; instead, the case studies of poltergeists and other popular psychic experiences were more interesting, and in some cases the accounts gave some information on family dynamics.

The Spiritist intellectual and former engineer Hernani Guimarães Andrade is probably the only Brazilian to have produced and published a well-researched body of case studies. His theoretical research (1983, 1984a, 1986) is probably too influenced by Spiritist assumptions to attract the average member of the Parapsychological Association, but he has written Brazil's only textbook on experimental parapsychology (1984b) and he has produced some very well-researched studies of poltergeists (1988a) and reincarnation cases (1988b) along Stevensonian lines, all of which conclude that alternative explanations (such as super-psi or dissociation) are less convincing than the Spiritist explanation. In another paper, I have discussed how the spirit interpretation of events such as poltergeists is related to Brazilian cultural values of hierarchy and personalism, just as the RSPK interpretation is congruent with the modern Western values related to individualism (Hess, 1989).

One also finds some interest in psychical research among the members of AMESP, the Spiritist Medical Association of São Paulo; in the Spiritist college in Curitiba, where there is an institute of psychobiophysics (Andrade's term for parapsychology); and in isolated groups across the country (see Sobral, 1984; Souza, 1985; Souza and Deitos 1980). In 1985, AMESP co-sponsored the First International Congress of Alternative Therapies, and it has also published the *Medico-Spiritist Bulletin*. The articles in the issues I have seen are generally rehearsals of Spiritist doctrine, but occasionally there is some empirical research, such as some case histories by a Spiritist psychiatrist (Lyra, 1984).

This is the extent of parapsychological research in Brazil. The medical profession and the universities have shown little formal interest in parapsychology, and they have generated little empirical research. Exceptions include some experimental research on precognition (Lessa, 1975) and a psychoanalytic study of telepathy (Levy-Júnior, 1970). In general, doctors or scientists who are interested in parapsychology tend to have an allegiance either to the Catholic or Spiritist position. There is a nominally neutral parapsychology organization, and from what I saw of the Rio-based Brazilian Association of Parapsychology (ABRAP), its members were not all Spiritists, but many of the ones I spoke with believed in spirits and extra-terrestrials. In any case, the organization held classes and meetings but did little research. André Percia de Carvalho, a psychology student in Rio de Janeiro who has also studied at FRNM, is one of the few parapsychology researchers I met in Brazil who is interested in a more non-aligned, empirical research.

#### Relations between Brazilian and PA Parapsychology

The polarization of Brazilian parapsychology into rival camps is an expression of a deeper division in Brazilian society between the Catholic Church and the Afro-Brazilian religions (see Hess, 1987a). Spiritists, who are generally whiter and more middle class, have sometimes participated in the oppression of Afro-Brazilian religions, and at other times they have been victims of the same forces of oppression (see Hess, 1987b). For example, Spiritists suffered during the 1930's and most of the 1940's, when Brazil was controlled by Getúlio Vargas, who after 1936 assumed dictatorial powers. Vargas worked closely with Cardinal Leme, and this partnership was at least partially responsible for the closing of many Spiritist centers and Afro-Brazilian temples and the jailing of their leaders.

Current debates on parapsychology therefore must be situated in this broader historical and cultural context. As I have discussed in my book *Spirits and Scientists*, there have been three attempts to get a law passed that would require parapsychology education in the nation's medical schools. At least two of these proposals bore a Spiritist imprint, and the Jesuits have actively attempted to block these proposals. There is also a controversy over the faith healing (*curandeirismo*) law, with Spiritists in favor of a more lenient law and Jesuits opposed to it.

To label any one type of Brazilian parapsychology "unscientific" or "less scientific" than the other could therefore mean playing into the hands of the other party. Likewise, developing a working relationship with, or participating in the institutions and conferences of, one type of parapsychology in Brazil could mean legitimating one group at the expense of the other. For example, since anything "international" or "first world" in Brazil means additional status, the participation of PA parapsychologists at Brazilian conferences that represent one group could mean legitimating either Catholic or Spiritist parapsychology at the expense of the other group (see Hess, 1987c).

I have had more dealings with Spiritists than Jesuits, so my observations will be restricted to Spiritists, but I think the same could apply to the Jesuits. Alvarado (1989) has discussed the meaning of language barriers in parapsychology in the context of written communication, but in the context of face-to-face and oral exchanges, the language barrier may involve some complicated maneuverings. For example, when Spiritists speak to each other in Portuguese, they think of their own parascience as "true parapsychology," whereas the narrower, experimental type of the PA conferences is to them part of the "materialist" scientific orthodoxies which they oppose. However, both Spiritists and Catholics will still appropriate PA parapsychology and the older studies of psychical research for their own purposes. They like to have the foreigners do the empirical research (the "dirty work"), while they sit back and put it into their own philosophical or theological frameworks. Old attitudes of the plantation owner's *noblesse oblige* spirit therefore enter into their way of "doing science" (see Hess, 1990, ch. 2).

From my observations, it appears that parapsychologists from the "exterior" who come to Brazil tend to work more closely with Spiritist parapsychologists, or those who maintain friendly relations to the Spiritist movement, rather than Jesuit parapsychologists. This is probably because Spiritists offer somewhat better access to mediums or others who are making claims of paranormality. Other factors, however, may be involved. For example, generally Spiritists (or those friendly to Spiritism) have been the ones willing to pay for invited lectures at conferences, and in addition those members of the PA who do research or give lectures in Brazil--and this is only a small number of the PA membership--may come from non-Catholic backgrounds or share survivalist assumptions with the Spiritists.

In any case, as I have pointed out before (1987c), there may be an exchange of access to third-world mediums for access to first-world status and legitimacy. Both parties may benefit, and while PA parapsychologists privately lament to themselves how unscientific the Spiritist parapsychologists are, Spiritists will privately lament among themselves how materialistic or positivistic the PA parapsychologists are. The language barrier may actually contribute to the exchange by allowing each side to pretend to ignore its differences from the other side.

If one has the misfortune to speak Portuguese fluently, then as a researcher one is likely to get long lectures which Spiritists called "indoctrination." Their theory is that if one listens to only ten percent of what they say, then they have made some inroads. This practice is not so widespread among Spiritist intellectuals, who are more cosmopolitan, but it is fairly common among the leaders of the local centers, who often control access to mediums who claim to have psychic abilities.

Leaders of local centers are often very happy to be visited by foreign researchers, since these visits legitimate their mediums and their centers. As in the case of conferences, any international participation makes it seem more serious and legitimate. However, once

this purpose has been served, there is little interest in or cooperation with the idea of testing the claims of paranormality made by mediums affiliated with the center. For example, in the case of Dr. Edson Queiroz, whose impresario introduced me to hundreds of waiting lay-people as a "great scientist from New York," I found there was no cooperation for or interest in doing follow-up interviews. Instead of controlled experiments, he was more interested in controlling experimenters. This is probably true of other well-known psychics or mediums in Brazil.

I am therefore rather skeptical of the prospects of "collaboration" between PA and Brazilian "parapsychologists." Perhaps it is best *not* to collaborate with Brazilian "parapsychologists" and that the prospect of flying down to Rio to investigate a psychic or to give a talk at a "parapsychology" conference is not the best use of scarce resources. Instead, I might suggest two strategies: one, support for training of a younger generation of Brazilian students who express an interest in parapsychology, as has occurred with André Percia de Carvalho at FRNM; and two, field studies that involve learning the language and staying at least one year in Brazil (the proverbial Malinowskian formula for fieldwork), studies which can situate claims of paranormality in their cultural context.

As a research strategy, it may be better to by-pass the well-known psychics and healers, who in turn are aligned with different religious groups and may have their appointed parapsychology patrons, and instead to go directly to families who believe they are experiencing or even suffering from various kinds of supernatural phenomena. Of course, this strategy depends on developing networks and personal connections, and this in turn requires fluency in the language and a long exposure to the culture. Without fluency, one will probably rely on local Spiritists or Catholics as translators, and they will inevitably try to control the kinds of questions one asks. For example, as I found during an interview with a poltergeist family in Puerto Rico during a field trip last summer (I am not very fluent in Spanish), the Spiritist translator interrupted my line of questioning about family dynamics to explain to me that the cause was due to a spirit. However, if one can achieve fluency in the local language, research on claims of sorcery, possession, poltergeists, reincarnation, and so on reveals a great deal about folk illnesses and popular culture in general, and its results will be of interest to anthropologists, clinicians, and others (e.g., Hess, in press).

This last point raises a final issue, what one might call the "paradox of Brazilian parapsychology": the fact that, despite the almost complete absence of empirical research, my impression is that most of the people in the country regard "parapsychology" with a high degree of respect, much more so than the more "scientific" parapsychology of North America and Western Europe holds among its populations. This may be simply because Brazilians are a less skeptical people than most North Americans and Western Europeans, but it is also true that in Brazil parapsychology often involves counseling and clinical work, and Brazilians therefore know that parapsychology has some useful role to play in their lives. This possibility raises the interesting question for the social studies of science, where the some sociologists (e.g., Pinch 1979) have questioned whether or not the replicability issue is really what stands between parapsychology's status as a heterodox or orthodox science. Brazilian parapsychology's therapeutic orientation suggests that the legitimacy issue may stand or fall more on "applicability" than "replicability," and this might be something that Brazilians have to teach the "orthodox" parapsychology of the Parapsychological Association.

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